



Marshall 2203 JCM800 reissue head £950

For those about to rock, we salute the return of Marshall's master volume monster amp by Nick Guppy

MARSHALL 2203 JCM800 REISSUE HEAD

PRICE: £950
ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: All valve, single-channel Class AB head with solid-state rectification

OUTPUT: 100W RMS

VALVES: Three

ECC83/12AX7 preamp, four EL34 power amp

DIMENSIONS: 300 (h) x 750 (w) x 220mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 25/50

CABINET: Birch ply

CHANNELS: One

CONTROLS: Gain, bass, mid and treble, master volume and presence

ADDITIONAL FEATURES:

Series effects loop with level and bypass switch

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: 1959 SLP head (£999), 1987X head (£804), 1962

'Bluesbreaker' combo (£1,038), JTM45 head (£784), 2203ZW Zakk

Wylde signature model (£1,023)

Marshall Amplification
www.marshallamps.com

It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, as the saying goes. When

Marshall were forced to temporarily withdraw their vintage reissue series of amplification following the introduction of new EC legislation, the outcome could have been a hasty redesign to comply with new regulations and get the affected products shipping again. However, the Bletchley-based company decided to step back for a while and re-evaluate things, as Marshall's Paul Hayhoe explained. "The vintage series is just as important to us as it is to our customers. It's our history at the end of the day. We took the opportunity to refine the existing range, to get the amps even closer to that 'golden tone' of the originals. And, following a deluge of requests, we expanded the range to include a few more old favourites. The JCM800, of course, was top of the list."

The original 2203 was introduced in 1975, but the actual JCM800 version of the 2203 – basically a cosmetic update with fretcloth on the baffle, the full-

width front panel and other differences like white piping, large Marshall logo and JCM800 on the front panel as well as Jim Marshall's signature – was introduced in 1981. The master volume layout allowed control of preamp gain, which gave the new amp a distinctively aggressive rasping bite that tied in perfectly with the musical changes taking place on both sides of the Atlantic. For American thrash and grunge, as well as the so-called new wave of Brit heavy metal, the JCM800 could do no wrong.

Internally, it's good to see Marshall have stayed as true as possible to the original. The cabinet is lock-joined birch ply, with a slab of perforated steel to protect the valves, and inside is a solid steel chassis with welded corners. All the valves and power supply capacitors are chassis mounted, as are the two transformers and the choke – a transformer-like component used to remove AC ripple from the DC supply.

The rest of the circuitry is mounted on a single-sided PCB with flying leads to front and rear panel controls. The PCB isn't through-plated, which may be historically accurate, but it would have been a bonus to see a plated board on this re-issue. Because of the layout there's a lot more hand-wiring than a modern Marshall. It's been executed to an acceptable standard, even though we'd like to have seen more twists in the wires that carry the AC heater supply on this sample.

These minor gripes aside, the build quality is as solid as you'd expect, which means this amp can happily withstand anything that life on the road might dish out to backline gear.

The front panel controls couldn't be easier to navigate, with just a row of six knobs for bass, mid, treble, presence, gain and master volume, plus a pair of input jacks to handle high and low output instruments.

Around the back there are the familiar voltage and impedance changer switches, and a pair of speaker outlets. This is also where you'll find the only deviation from the original model: a series effects loop with switchable levels which has now been added to all the reissue amps. "This is by far the most common mod you'll find on older Marshalls," Hayhoe commented. "For absolute tonal authenticity, we've included a bypass switch which completely removes the loop from the signal path."

SOUNDS: Talking of which, how good does this reissue sound, and how does it fare against the original? Well, let's start off by saying that a JCM800 doesn't do subtlety. Imagine carving up a grand piano with a very big chainsaw and you're beginning to get the picture. It's the amplification equivalent of a Rottweiler with titanium teeth and comes with a rebellious tone which defined rock guitar for the eighties.


Clean sounds? Don't make us laugh. →

MARSHALL JCM800 TEST RESULTS

Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

WE LIKED The best JCM800 tone ever, with extra versatility from the effects loop

WE DISLIKED It would have been nice to see a plated board on this reissue

A close-up, low-angle photograph of the control panel of a Marshall JCM800 guitar amplifier. The image is dominated by a dark, textured, woven fabric cover on the left, which is part of the amplifier's faceplate. To the right, a light-colored wooden baffle board is visible, featuring three large, cylindrical, silver-colored knobs arranged diagonally. The text "JCM 800" and "LEAD SERIES" is printed in large, bold, black letters on the wooden board. The lighting is warm and directional, coming from the upper right, creating strong highlights and shadows that emphasize the textures and materials.

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JCM 800 LEAD SERIES

The JCM800: surely one of the most important amps ever produced



Built like a tank – and just as loud! But now there's an fx loop too

→ Wind up the volume, hit a power chord on any guitar you like and you can guarantee an audience's immediate attention. The JCM800 sounds best when played flat out, and running one at low volume levels doesn't do the amp any justice. Despite what you might think, there isn't a massive amount of front-end gain and many pub players who won't push the master volume beyond two will find the amp too trebly and over responsive, with notes almost seeming to jump out of the loudspeaker before they're played. The trick is to use a good distortion pedal to boost the front end. This gives a result that's similar to winding the master volume up into the red zone, with a fatter sound and more controllable dynamics. Marshall's Bluesbreaker was thoughtfully supplied for this review and it's an ideal companion: with one of these plugged in you can fine-tune the drive and EQ for a blistering lead tone that any Gary Moore fan would sell his granny for.

We set the reissue up alongside two originals (one 100W and a 50W version), as well as having Marshall's non-master volume 1959 SLP 'Plexi' reissue for comparison. The JCM reissue came out on top as having the fullest, most ballsy tone at all but flat-out volume levels – here the Plexi pipped it with a more even balance.

A lot of effort has been made to find the definitive JCM800 sound for this amp. "Components varied quite a bit on the originals," explained Hayhoe, "even more so with older models like the Plexi. We brought in a lot of amps from the UK and the States, and did a lot of listening before deciding exactly how the reissue was going to sound."

Compared to the 1959, the emphasis is in the upper, rather than lower, mid-range area – a snarl instead of a growl if you like – and that famous buzz-saw distortion is better defined than ever.

At full tilt through a pair of 4 x 12s it's seriously loud. A massive power supply delivers huge dynamic range all the way to the top, at which point structural engineers and small furry animals will begin to look more than a little worried. Sadly, there aren't that many places you can run an amp like this flat out, and it has to be added that in a small room extreme volume levels will surely damage your – and your audience's – hearing.

Verdict

It's great to see the JCM800 back in Marshall's catalogue after all this time. The reissue price is considerably more than you would have paid 20 years ago, but for those players who want the real thing it's a much better alternative than an overpriced used and abused original – and the inclusion of an effects loop

improves its versatility no end, and saves you the trouble of getting this mod done for yourself.

If you really want to push the boat out, there's also the limited edition Zakk Wylde signature model, which is fitted with 6550 instead of EL34 valves and has a different colour scheme, along with some cool control panel graphics. A Zakk memorabilia pack, including a certificate jointly signed by Messrs Wylde and Marshall, is also part of the deal. But hurry if you want one of these, as only 600 are being distributed worldwide and just 100 earmarked for the UK.

If you want to really, really rock then few amps can deliver the adrenaline rush of this JCM800. **B**

Marshall 2203 JCM800 head

Guitarist RATING

★★★★★

The rivals

Laney GH100L £399
Peavey Triple XXX £999
Cornford MK50H £1,199
Laney's GH100L delivers a lot of tone for a bargain basement price – and it's seriously loud too. Peavey's Triple X has a focused tone that's just perfect for hard rock and metal riffing – it's got plenty of attitude and volume to spare. Cornford's MK50 continues to excite with one of the best rock guitar tones you'll ever hear and superb point-to-point build quality

Who's played 'em?

You could argue that the explosion of hard rock and metal acts in the late seventies and early eighties wouldn't have had the same impact if it hadn't been for the JCM800 amplifier. Just about every band was using them and we could probably fill most of Guitarist with a list of their names. Some players, however, stand out as seminal JCM800 users because all have used the JCM800 to devastating effect at one time or another: Angus Young, Billy Gibbons, Gary Moore, Slayer's Kerry King and Jeff Hanneman and, of course, Zakk Wylde, who has recently been honoured with a signature model – only the second time Marshall have done this. Whatever your taste in rock – from AC/DC's power riffs to the twin guitar harmonies of Thin Lizzy, or the heavily-layered Eliminator-era harmonic distortion of ZZ Top, through to the 100 miles-an-hour thrash excitement of Slayer or Zakk Wylde's fret-melting lead work with



Blizzard Of Oz – the JCM800 has a place in history as the amp that powered some of the most thrilling rock guitar music ever heard. Good to see it back. Incidentally, while JCM stands for James Charles Marshall, the 800 model designation just happened to be the registration number of Jim's car.